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ABSTRACT

The research studied adolescents' opinions of and attitudes toward police. Answers to the following questions were sought: (1) Do sex differences in appraisals of policemen continue into the senior year of high school? (2) Is there a significant relationship between how students perceive police and how they have been treated by policemen? (3) Is there congruence between adolescents' appraisal of policemen and their appraisals of school authorities--teachers and administrators? Four hundred and nineteen high school seniors in San Jose, California responded to three questionnaire items asking for an evaluation of police fairness. The students were also asked if they had ever been in a situation in which they had felt unjustly treated by a policeman and/or by teachers and other school authorities. Findings showed that: (1) Girls continue to rate policemen more favorably than do boys. (2) Those treated unjustly by a policeman had a poorer opinion of policemen. (3) There is congruence between adolescents' appraisal of policemen and their appraisals of school authorities. (Author/RM)

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LAW AND JUSTICE:

ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF POLICEMEN

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EARLY APPRAISALS OF POLICEMEN

According to the literature on political socialization, young children tend to have a naive trust in the benevolence of government and its representatives--including the President and the policeman--which tends to diminish between the early grades and adolescence (Hess and Torney, 1967; Easton and Dennis, 1969). Greenberg (1970) likewise found that three-fourths of the third graders in his study scored high on his Police Affect Index, dropping for ninth graders to 23% of Blacks and 40% of whites. Bouma's (1969) sample of junior high school students overlapped the top age range in these previous studies, and expressed a mix of positive and negative attitudes toward policemen. Seventy percent of his respondents felt that policemen are "pretty nice guys," but with strong differences of opinion by race: 75% of the whites agreed, but only 43% of the Blacks did so. Yet, unlike the younger children of other studies, these junior high school students have generally negative expectations of policemen:

1. One-third of the white youth and two-thirds of the Black youth think the police accuse students of things they did not do.

2. Almost half of the students think police are "always picking on the guy who has been in trouble before."

3. A third of the white students and half of the Black students think police have it in for young people.

These findings indicate a continuation in the negative trend of children's appraisals of policemen.

ADOLESCENTS' APPRAISALS

Adolescents' expectations of fairness from policemen are shaped by early school instruction, by policemen's generalized community reputa-

tion for fairness, by experiences of family and peers, and by personal encounters. This combination of personal and vicarious experience with police appears to temper young children's high positive appraisals of policemen. Bouma (1969) concluded that antagonism toward the police increases significantly as the student moves through the junior high school years. Straf and Tenenberg (1972) noted similar attitudes among high school students and found them to be correlated with "unpleasant police experiences."

Adolescents' appraisals of policemen in this study, as measured by responses to three items asking for evaluation of police fairness, were examined in terms of three variables. First, do sex differences in appraisals of policemen continue into the senior year of high school? Studies of young children's attitudes toward policemen which included analysis by sex found that girls consistently rated the policeman higher than did boys (Hess and Torney, 1967; Easton and Dennis, 1969; Forbes and Dykstra, 1971; Torney, 1971). Straf and Tenenberg (1972) found girls held only slightly more favorable attitudes than did boys: only 39% of the girls agreed with the statement that policemen accuse students of things they did not do, as compared with 44% of the boys.

Second, is there a significant relationship between responses to the three police items and students' reported experiences of unjust treatment by policemen? Students were asked, "Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt you were unjustly treated by a policeman?" This was the last item of the questionnaire in order to avoid coloring

responses to preceding attitudinal items. Respondents were given space to describe the incidents if they chose, but this was made optional to keep students from answering "No" to the item to avoid a writing task.

Third, to what extent is there congruence between adolescents' appraisals of policemen and their appraisals of school authorities--teachers and administrators? While policemen are often the most ubiquitous representatives of government authority to adolescents, it is generally in schools that children learn how to survive within institutions. The sociological literature strongly suggests that by high school the authority structure of the school alienates many students who see little articulation between the demands of the school and their own claims to adult status (Stinchcombe, 1964). Thus adolescents frequently come into conflict with the school.

The data were collected from 419 high school seniors enrolled in the required one-semester government course in two high schools in a San Jose, California school district. Both high schools were built within the past five years to keep pace with the rapid development of lower to middle class residential tracts on the fringe of urban San Jose. Questions on ethnic background could not be included due to school objections, but it is estimated that 10% of the respondents were Black and about 20% Chicano.

FINDINGS

Sex differences. A higher percentage of girls than boys favorably

appraised policemen in each of the three police items, but these differences were statistically significant ($p < .005$) only for Item 2 (Table 1). Over one-third of the boys agreed that police and the courts are "out to get" teenagers, while only 21% of the girls agreed, a result which may be, at least in part, attributable to boys' greater contact with policemen.

Experience of unjust police treatment. Approximately one-fourth (106) of the respondents reported an experience of being unjustly treated by a policeman. Of these 106 students, 69 (65%) were boys and 37 (35%) were girls. In fact, over one-third of the boys (37%) reported having such an encounter with a policeman, compared to only 16% of the girls. These percentages are somewhat lower than those obtained by Straf and Tenenberg (1972) in their more urban sample of teenagers in San Francisco, forty miles from the site of this study. They found that 47% of the boys and 29% of the girls reported an "unpleasant experience" with a policeman.

As Table 2 indicates, there were highly significant differences in agreement with the three police items based on the experience of the respondents. Those who reported having been unjustly treated by a policeman were significantly less likely ($p < .001$) to agree with favorable appraisals of policemen. Almost half (47%) agreed that police and courts seem to be "out to get" teenagers, while fewer than half (44%) agreed that policemen only stop people if they have reason to suspect them of having done something wrong, and only one-third agreed that policemen usually treat teenagers fairly and courteously.

Relationships between appraisals of policemen and of school authorities. For both girls and boys there was a significant correlation (.41 and .33, $p < .001$) between Items 2 and 4 (Tables 3 and 4). These items emphasize a stance of capricious punitiveness on the part of policemen and school authorities.

There were two sex differences in appraisals. For boys Item 3, "Policemen usually treat teenagers fairly and courteously," was significantly correlated with Items 5 and 6 which stress the openness and appropriateness of school authorities' behavior--correlations of .26 and .24, $p < .001$ (Table 4). For girls these correlations were close to zero (Table 3).

On the other hand, girls who disagreed with the statement that policemen and the courts were "out to get" teenagers (Item 2) were more likely to agree that teachers were willing to listen to students (Item 5) and to treat students fairly (Item 6). There were significant correlations for girls (.21 and .32, $p < .001$), but lower, non-significant correlations for boys.

In addition respondents were asked to relate incidents in which they felt they had been "unjustly treated" by teachers or school administrators. Forty-one percent (173) reported being unjustly treated, and 69 of these wrote descriptions.

DISCUSSION

While girls continue to appraise policemen slightly more favorably than do boys, sex differences in appraisals of policemen appear to

narrow substantially in late adolescence. This finding may be explained by the increasing exposure of adolescents--boys and girls--to police contacts. In the San Jose area, even more than in San Francisco where Straf and Tenenberg conducted their study, cars are the principal source of mobility and permit teenagers to move outside their own neighborhoods and into encounters with police.

Of the 106 respondents who said they had been unjustly treated by a policeman, almost half (52) also wrote descriptions of the incidents. Many other students made comments about policemen at the end of the instrument. These anecdotal data underscore the car-related nature of many teenagers' encounters with police and also indicate some sex differences in the incidents reported. Both boys and girls reported being stopped by policemen for driving violations or to be searched for drugs. However, while boys were frequently alone or with a group of boys, girls were usually with a boy friend when stopped by the police, and--if in a car--the boy was always driving. The reported incidents strongly suggest that adolescent boys are far more likely to draw police attention, with the rate of reporting "unjust" police treatment as an indicator of that--37% of the boys and only 16% of the girls.

Three general orientations toward policemen emerge from these reported incidents and comments. First, incidents which violated their naive trust in the benevolence of policemen ["The policeman is your friend"] led the respondents to feel surprised and indignant:

> "He didn't want to listen just gave me a ticket and went away."
>
> "Some guy friends stopped to help push [my car] to get it started. A policeman came and the first thing he did was

pull his gun on us, and I thought that was very wrong there."

"I ask for a policeman's help and he laughed at me."

Second, some respondents reflected the view that policemen are particularly suspicious of adolescents:

> "I think that teenagers shouldn't be suspected of doing everything wrong. If a teenager drives a new car the police thinks they stole it or they just wanted to 'drag' in it."

While agreeing with this position, several respondents suggested that, in balance, some teenagers give the police reason to be suspicious:

> "I think that teenagers aggravate policemen into being rough because they think they know it all when they don't. But then policemen get the idea that all teenagers are that way and they may treat all of them rough, which isn't fair."

> "I just think that the police are harder on teenagers but I also think the majority of the teenagers make them act as they do. The [y] cause the police to be ruff and on the gaurd. But the minority of teenagers that are good suffer from this. It's a shame."

Third, at one extreme were the few respondents who felt that they were <u>always</u> being unjustly treated by policemen. As one respondent wrote, "I can't think of one [incident] there was so many." Another wrote, "I'm always walking along on the road and getting hassled just because I look a little scroungy."

The descriptions of "unjust" treatment at school help to delineate the characteristics of acts which respondents consider unjust. Most frequently reported were charges that teachers or administrators had wrongly accused them of misconduct--of talking in class, of being high on drugs, or of failing to return a library book. The second most frequently reported situation was being given a failing grade:

> "I was given an F and not even warened or given a good reason why."
>
> "Last year my teacher flunked me when I don't think I deserved it. He's a jerk anyway."

Some respondents expect teachers and counselors, in particular, to be concerned about them, and they feel hurt when they do not get the consideration they feel they deserve:

> "Trying to talk to my counselor and he just wouldn't listen."
>
> "The school counsilal convinced me that I should take cources which I didn't want to take. He said that I needed the clases if I wanted to go to colege. Later on I found out from some friends that I didn't need them."

Finally some students reported getting caught up in some administrative tangles which are unfortunately characteristic of many schools:

> "I sat in the office for 5 hours waiting for them to call my parents so I could get an admit card. I was sick the day before and stayed home."
>
> "I had to stay after school because i forgot my pencil."

These incidents, together with the police incidents, suggest that many adolescents feel that certain norms exist for policemen's and teachers' behavior toward subordinates (adolescents): (1) that the subordinate is innocent until proven guilty; (2) that the subordinate should have the opportunity to explain his/her conduct; and (3) that the subordinate deserves to be treated with respect. That adolescents expect these norms to operate in schools and with policemen underscores the statement by Tapp and Kohlberg (1971) that

> Since the individual's legal reasoning guides his interaction in a variety of authority rule systems or systems of law, a multiplicity of settings beyond government (state law) likewise provide the opportunity for developing senses of legality and justice (p. 89).

It is possible that some of the respondents who reported never having been unjustly treated at school may reflect the thoroughness of their socialization to school procedures, as a result of which they have come to accept as reasonable treatment that which other, less well socialized students would reject. Encounters with police, however, are so inherently threatening that such habituation usually does not take place without programs which bring policemen and adolescents together under non-threatening circumstances (Gitchoff, 1969).

SUMMARY

While girls in the last year of high school continue to rate policemen more favorably than do boys, this difference was statistically significant for only one of the three police items. Respondents who reported being unjustly treated by a policeman rated policemen significantly lower on all three items than did those reporting no such experiences. The congruence between respondents' attitudes about unjust treatment by police and by school authorities, together with the correlations between police and school ratings, indicate that respondents hold norms of appropriate behavior by authorities in both settings.

TABLE 1

PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS AGREEING
WITH POLICE ITEMS BY SEX (N=230)

Item	Percent of Each Group Agreeing		
	Females (N=230)	Males (N=189)	χ^2
1. Policemen only stop people if they have good reason to suspect that they have done something wrong.	70.9 (163)	65.6 (124)	1.1
2. Policemen and the courts seem to be "out to get" teenagers.	20.9 (48)	35.4 (67)	10.4*
3. Policemen usually treat teenagers fairly and courteously.	60.0 (138)	50.3 (95)	3.6

* Significant at $p<.005$

TABLE 2

PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS AGREEING WITH POLICE ITEMS
BY REPORTED EXPERIENCE OF UNJUST POLICE TREATMENT

Item	Percent of Each Group Agreeing		χ^2
	Experience (N=106)	No Experience (N=313)	
1. Policemen only stop people if they have good reason to suspect that they have done something wrong.	44.3 (47)	76.7 (240)	36.9*
2. Policement and the courts seem to be "out to get" teenagers.	47.2 (50)	20.8 (65)	26.4*
3. Policemen usually treat teenagers fairly and courteously.	32.1 (34)	63.6 (199)	30.6*

* Significant at $p < .001$

TABLE 3

INTERITEM CORRELATIONS FOR POLICE AND SCHOOL ITEMS[1] FOR FEMALES (N=230)

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Policemen only stop people if they have good reason to suspect that they have done something wrong.	---	.16	.23*	.09	.19	.15
2. Policemen and the courts seem to be "out to get" teenagers. (reversed)		---	.25*	.41*	.21*	.32*
3. Policemen usually treat teenagers fairly and courteously.			---	.14	.07	.03
4. Sometimes teachers and school administrators give me a hard time for no reason at all. (reversed)				---	.29*	.44*
5. Teachers here are usually willing to listen to what students want, if students present their ideas clearly.					---	.46*
6. I feel that I am treated the way I deserve by my teachers.						---

1 Responses ranged from 4, "Strongly Agree," to 1, "Strongly Disagree," with responses to Items 2 and 4 reversed.

* Significant at $p < .001$

TABLE 4

INTERITEM CORRELATIONS FOR POLICE AND SCHOOL ITEMS[1] FOR MALES (N=189)

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Policemen only stop people if they have good reason to suspect that they have done something wrong.	---	.09	.25*	.17	.20	.19
2. Policemen and the courts seem to be "out to get" teenagers. (reversed)		---	.32*	.33*	.11	.10
3. Policemen usually treat teenagers fairly and courteously.			---	.19	.26*	.24*
4. Sometimes teachers and school administrators give me a hard time for no reason at all. (reversed)				---	.34*	.26*
5. Teachers here are usually willing to listen to what students want, if students present their ideas clearly.					---	.25*
6. I feel that I am treated the way I deserve by my teachers.						---

[1] Responses ranged from 4, "Strongly agree," to 1, "Strongly disagree," with responses to Items 2 and 4 reversed.

* Significant at $p < .001$